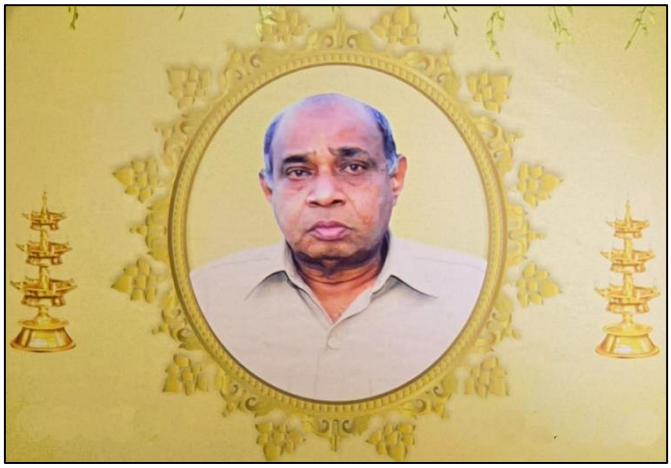
PITTA

Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 20 Number 10 September 2023

UP THERE AMONGST THE RARA AVIS AND PAPILLONS RARE

JVD Moorty



Deccan Birders has lost one of the founders and the first Secretary of the erstwhile Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, its former *avatar*.

Prof Dr S Tej Kumar passed away on 6th September 2023. He would have been 84 on 3rd December.

Dr Tej Kumar has been associated with the Society for more than forty years. About fifteen years ago he turned his activities towards butterflies – in 2006, he founded and was the first President of the Butterfly Conservation Society.

Insects were his first love. He worked for almost 40 years as Professor and Head of the Entomology division at Acharya N G Ranga Agricultural University. After obtaining his Masters in Agricultural Entomology, he went on to earn a doctorate in the same field and was also a Fellow of the Entomological Society of India.

I first met Dr Tej Kumar on one of the field trips of the BSAP around 1982. His keen eye would catch the slightest movement of insects under and on leaves, dry or green, on branches and trunks of trees in spite of their camouflage, and there would be a quick observation on the identity of the culprit and its life style – he was a veritable fountain of unending information on these crawlies. He was a very warm, welcoming and kind person with an immensely positive outlook on life and a fundamental faith in humanity. His candour could always put everyone at ease and there wasn't a person who did not feel a rapport with him. He loved to talk birds too, and he possessed a wry sense of humour.

As a committed environmentalist and a passionate wildlife lover this passion for nature led him to being involved with the A.P. Biodiversity Board as the Butterfly specialist. It was a proud moment for us when he was invited to act as Advisor in establishing the Butterfly Park at Ramoji Rao Film City and also at Nehru Zoological Park, where his deep involvement helped in making a success of both ventures. This apart, he was also on the boards of various universities and colleges.

I vividly recall how field trips with him were something to enjoy, where his knowledge always brought wonder to the birders during an intensive day of birding and 'insecting'. He always evoked the admiration of his fellow-birders. Till his last day on this mortal world, he felt for and loved his birds and butterflies. His personal collection of butterfly specimens was mouth-watering and jaw-dropping.

May he continue to be with his beloved butterflies and the birds, and with our first President, Mr Pushp Kumar, where they can continue to revel in Nature.

He leaves behind a grieving daughter and a son.

May his soul find eternal peace!

FIELD TRIP-1: Sunday, 10th September 2023, 6.00AM: Ameenpur Lake. Meeting Point: Miyapur Metro Station, 5.30AM. Trip Coordinator(s): Sudhir K Moorti (Mobile: 96522-83335)

Ameenpur is a beautiful and serene spot that is home to a wide variety of birds, making it a great destination for an outing. A man-made lake created for the purpose of providing drinking water to the city, Ameenpur also serves as a prime habitat for various bird species, including migratory ones.

FIELD TRIP-2: Sunday, 24th September 2023, 7.00AM: Shamirpet Deer Park & Lake. Meeting Point: Opposite Vacs Bakery, Vikrampuri, 6.15AM. Trip Coordinator(s): JVD Moorty (Mobile: 98494-70411)

The park stretches over a vast area of 54 acres with deciduous forest giving shelter to a wide array of animals. Famous as the home to the Blackbuck and the Chital deer, one can also spot monitor lizards and porcupines, among other animals. The lake is known for its serene environment surrounded by deciduous evergreen trees, climbers and grasslands. The Park is home to different species of birds, and it attracts many birds from the surrounding areas too, making it a good bird watching spot. Some of the birds seen earlier are Black-tailed Godwit, the three Cormorants, the three Bitterns, Hoopoe, Black-headed Cuckoo Shrike, Peregrine Falcon and some of the Woodpeckers, and we may spot a few early migrants too. Shamirpet Park is also home to one of the two Butterfly parks in Hyderabad, the other being Mrugavani National Park.

Both trips will be half-day trips, so carry adequate water and breakfast/snacks, and protective gear if required. Strict Covid protocols will be followed; please ensure you wear masks, carry a sanitiser and maintain social distancing. Non-members are most welcome; however, they are requested to contribute Rs. 100/- per person to the Deccan Birders kitty.

Trip Report: Yenkathala Grasslands, Mominpet, August 06, 2023

K Sudhir Moorti

A view of Yenkathala Grasslands (Photo: K Sudhir Moorti)

Early Sunday morning we set off on yet another Deccan Birders trip, this time to the Yenkathala Grasslands. The grasslands, located roughly 60km from the city, have become a popular hotspot of late, and about 200 species have been observed here. It is much visited in winter since a lot of migrants like Harriers, Short-eared Owl, Peregrine Falcon etc can be found here.

Quite a few of our members and keen birders gathered at the designated meeting points and we started towards a promising morning of birding, stopping at Shankarpally for a quick 'Chai-Biskoot' break.

We reached the destination in a convoy of about ten cars. Having parked the cars, we first scouted around for the Sirkeer Malkoha, which was supposed to hang around that particular spot. Our search yielded sightings of Scaly-breasted Munias, Indian Silverbill, Ashy and Plain Prinias, a couple of Spot-billed Ducks in flight and a few other commonly found species and, finally, a brief glimpse of a Sirkeer flying away.

Pied Bushchat male (Photo: Gurukumar KR)

Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark male (Photo: Gurukumar KR)

Jacobin Cuckoo (Photo: Gurukumar KR)

As we walked on a narrow path up a small hillock, we heard the distinct raspy call of the Painted Francolin somewhere in the fields below, but could not sight it. We did see a Jacobin Cuckoo, though.

Laughing Dove (Photo: Asif Husain Arastu)

We moved on to the grasslands where, much to our delight, we almost immediately sighted a small flock of Indian Coursers. Some were juveniles and most of our team wielding cameras could capture some decent shots.

Indian Courser adult (behind) and juvenile (front)
(Photo: K Sudhir Moorti)

Indian Courser adult (Photo: Mohd Adnan Uddin)

White-eyed Buzzard (Photo: Mohd Adnan Uddin)

Meanwhile a White-eyed Buzzard flew in and landed on a small tree stump. We tried to approach, hoping to get a few shots but in vain – as usual the blighter flew away, though some members who pushed further ahead could eventually manage to get some really good shots.

Part of the group during the walk (Photo: K Sudhir Moorti)

We were a large group of about 25, so we split up into smaller groups. Each group wandered off into a different direction. Our group went further ahead to the edge of the grasslands but found nothing much of interest. On the way back we saw a few Sykes's Larks on the ground. I could manage to squeeze off a few shots.

Sykes's Lark (Photo: Asif Husain Arastu)

Suddenly a raptor flew by; judging by the flight and wing shape we concluded it was a Common Kestrel. Earlier than usual arrival, I would say, but nothing surprises me any more nowadays, when unusual sightings are more common.

Yellow-eyed Babbler (Photo: Gurukumar KR)

Somewhere deep in the grass a Rain Quail started calling but we felt it would futile to look for it, and moved on.

We were just about to move to the nearby lake to explore the surroundings when our forward party informed us that the Lake is full and unapproachable, so we decided to loiter around the grasslands some more.

Yellow-wattled Lapwing (Photo: Asif Husain Arastu)

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse male (Photo: Gurukumar KR)

A small flock of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse came and landed about 100 meters away from us. We gleefully tried to approach but they decided not to give us a close-up audience.

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse female (Photo: Gurukumar KR)

Finally, we decided to call it a day. The whole group gathered for a group pic and slowly dispersed, bidding each other adieu. Until the next trip mates, until the next trip.

The participants at the trip (Photo: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

The full list of birds seen during the trip:

S No	Species Name	Scientific Name	S No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Indian Spot-billed Duck	*Anas poecilorhyncha*	27	Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus ibis*
2	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	28	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*
3	Grey Francolin	*Francolinus pondicerianus*	29	Black-winged Kite	*Elanus caeruleus*
4	Painted Francolin	*Francolinus pictus*	30	White-eyed Buzzard	*Butastur teesa*
5	Little Grebe	*Tachybaptus ruficollis*	31	Shikra	*Accipiter badius*
6	Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*	32	White-throated Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*
7	Eurasian Collared Dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*	33	Indian Golden Oriole	*Oriolus kundoo*
8	Spotted Dove	*Streptopelia chinensis*	34	Common Iora	*Aegithina tiphia*
9	Laughing Dove	*Streptopelia senegalensis*	35	Rose-ringed Parakeet	*Psittacula krameri*
10	Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse	*Pterocles exustus*	36	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*
11	Sirkeer Malkoha	*Taccocua leschenaultii*	37	Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark	*Eremopterix griseus*
12	Greater Coucal	*Centropus sinensis*	38	Sykes's Lark	*Galerida deva*
13	Jacobin Cuckoo	*Clamator jacobinus*	39	Ashy Prinia	*Prinia socialis*
14	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*	40	Plain Prinia	*Prinia inornata*
15	Little Swift	*Apus affinis*	41	Grey-breasted Prinia	*Prinia hodgsonii*
16	Eurasian Moorhen	*Gallinula chloropus*	42	Zitting Cisticola	*Cisticola juncidis*
17	Eurasian Coot	*Fulica atra*	43	Streak-throated Swallow	*Petrochelidon fluvicola*
18	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	44	Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*
19	Yellow-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus malabaricus*	45	Yellow-eyed Babbler	*Chrysomma sinense*
20	Indian Courser	*Cursorius coromandelicus*	46	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*
21	River Tern	*Sterna aurantia*	47	Scaly-breasted Munia	*Lonchura punctulata*
22	Oriental Darter	*Anhinga melanogaster*	48	House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*
23	Little Cormorant	*Microcarbo niger*	49	Paddyfield Pipit	*Anthus rufulus*
24	Indian Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*	50	Indian Robin	*Saxicoloides fulicatus*
25	Great Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*	51	Indian Silverbill	*Euodice malabarica*
26	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*			

* * *

CARACAL: HIGH-JUMPING BIRD-CATCHER

Praba & Sheela

Sunset

A plump pheasant hen pecks

Silence is me

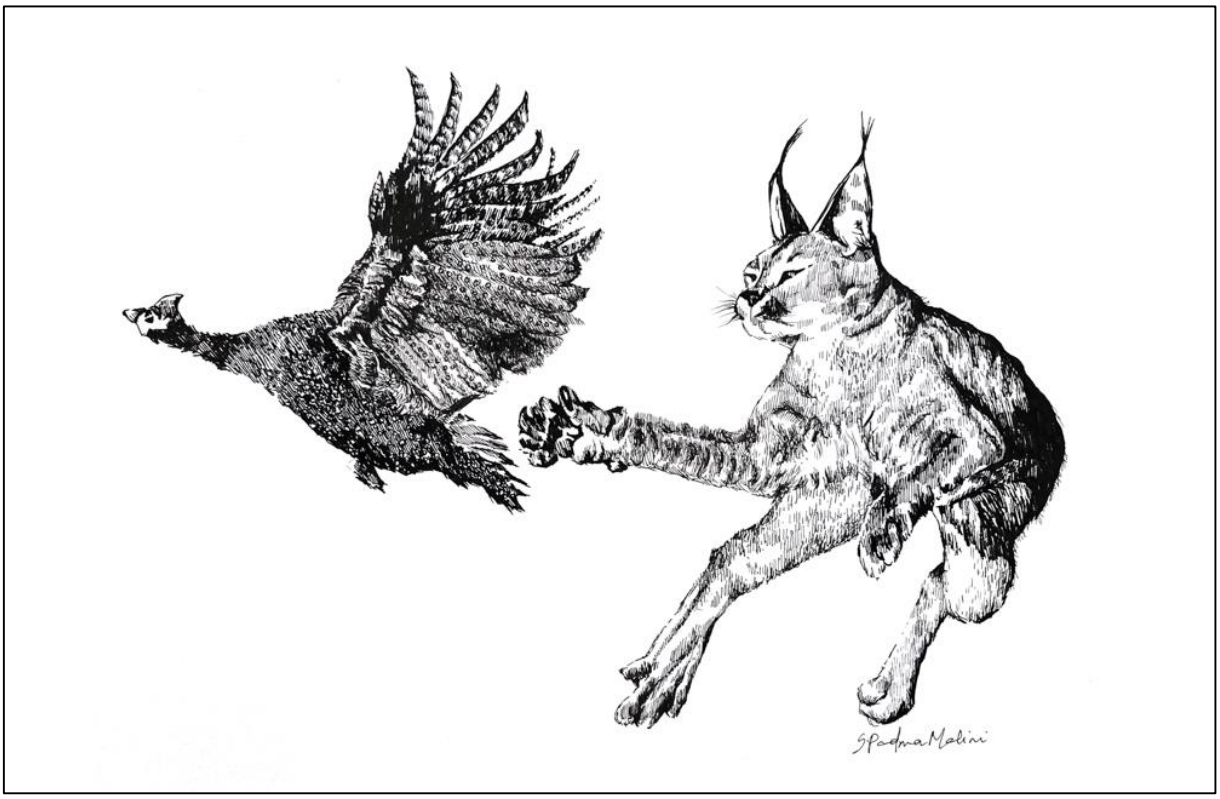
Tasseled ears my asset

She senses, takes flight

Prime instincts propel

Ten feet in the air we collide.

My kittens won't go hungry tonight.



With long tufts of hair in its rather large ears, the Caracal (ker-uh-kull) listens carefully as it moves in the tall grass. When it identifies a prey, which is often a hovering bird, it springs up to catch the unsuspecting creature in mid-air. This high-jumping bird-catcher has long muscular hind legs and no markings or patterns or additional colouring on its tawny sand-coloured coat. It is believed that this special ability to leap up in the air allowed people to use trained caracal for bird-hunting.

About the contributors:

Praba & Sheela are fascinated by all the terrestrial, marine, and avian cohabitants of our earth. They strive to bring the biodiversity of our world to children by sharing interesting tidbits about the animal kingdom with the hope of encouraging future conservationists to engage positively with their natural world.

Padma Malini Soman, a freelance artist based out of Chennai. As a passionate observer and learner who finds comfort in her sketchbook, Padma loves working with pen and exploring different media. Her artwork can be seen on Instagram at @theplainpaperspage.

* * *

Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Northern Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)

Northern Lapwing (Gajoldoba, West Bengal, January 24, 2021)

Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Charadriidae
Genus: *Vanellus*
Species: *V. vanellus*
Size: 28-31 cm

Description & distribution: The Northern Lapwing, also known as the Peewit, Tewit, Green Plover or Pyewipe, is the shoetest-legged of the lapwings. It is a handsome, striking wader with a beautiful, long and wispy crest that instantly sets it apart from other similarly-built birds. It has boldly patterned plumage that looks overall black and white, but the upperparts show a beautiful green gloss in good light. Black crown, throat and face contrast with a white face and underparts. Female and young birds have shorter crests and less strongly marked heads, but otherwise the plumage is quite similar. Bill is black, legs are pink or flesh-coloured, and wingtips are broad and rounded unlike most waders. It is a monotypic species – no sub-species are recognized.

The Northern Lapwing is common across temperate parts of Europe and Siberia. It is highly migratory, migrating mainly by day, with almost all populations wintering south to North Africa, northern India, Nepal, Bhutan and parts of China; the only exception is the lowland breeding population in the westernmost parts of Europe, which are resident. It is also an occasional vagrant to North America.

Habitat & behaviour: The Northern Lapwing prefers open habitats – grassland, farmland, shrub country, marshes, river banks, wetlands and, sometimes, coastal mudflats. It forms huge flocks from late summer through winter, numbering from several hundreds to even thousands. It tends to spend the day quietly on sandbars, mudflats, arable land or other suitable locations, and feeds mostly at night when there is moonlight. Its diet consists mainly of insects and other small invertebrates. It often feeds in mixed flocks along with Golden Plovers and Black-headed Gulls, both plovers occasionally getting robbed by the gulls, but receiving some measure of protection against predators in return. It flies with deep, floppy wingbeats, and the flight is slow, irregular and noisy, with its large wings making 'lapping' sounds. The usual contact call is a loud, shrill *pee-wit*. While breeding, it puts up an elaborate display, with a tumbling flight accompanied by continuous calling; these are usually wheezy *pee-wit, wit-wit, or eeze-wit* sounds, but they may also make squeaking or mewing sounds. Like many plovers, it also uses broken-wing display to lure potential predators away from the nest; alternatively, it may also defend the nest and young noisily while aggressively darting at the predators.

Nesting: In its breeding grounds, the Northern Lapwing breeds generally between March and May. The nest is a shallow scrape in the ground, and the usual clutch consists of 3-4 beige eggs, heavily blotched with brown or black spots.

Local name: The Northern Lapwing is known as *'Bodal tatihri'* in Punjabi and *'Sabaz titti'* in Bengali.

* * *